BEYOND GOODNESS

February 18, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 49:8-13
Matthew 5:17-26

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

-Matthew 5:20 (RSV)

It is not easy to do the right thing. It is not easy to know what the right thing is. It never was, but the world in which we live, and the world of the future which is emerging, have made the matter of knowing and doing the right thing more difficult, and more critical than ever.

The newspaper yesterday was a virtual textbook in the moral complexity of our world. In Los Angeles, a couple whose seventeen-year-old daughter is dying of leukemia has conceived a baby from whom they hope to be able to take bone marrow cells which could save the seventeen-year-old's life. They are being criticized by ethicists from coast to coast.

In Milwaukee, a twelve-year-old boy was convicted and sentenced for sticking a sawed-off shot gun in the face of an undercover policeman. "Little Man," as he is known to Milwaukee law enforcement officers, worked as a guard at a crack house for which he was paid $100 a day. Let's think about him and what went wrong.

Who could have imagined the epidemic of cocaine and crack addiction in which we find ourselves? Who could have predicted that this substance, virtually unknown just a few years ago, would become a major cause of societal deterioration affecting every social system we have? At the level of morality, or at least the minimum acceptable standards of public behavior, we have agreed that the use of this substance is not a good thing: so bad, in fact, that we have made its use and its sale illegal criminal behavior. Who could have foreseen that our moral position would actually seem to contribute to the epidemic level of this drug's use. Because it is illegal, it is scarce. Because it is scarce, it is expensive. Because it is expensive, it is profitable. Because it is profitable, a fourteen-year-old youngster in Cabrini Green can earn lots of money - several hundred dollars a week, being a spotter, runner or salesman in what has become a huge, well organized and highly efficient entrepreneurial system. What's the right thing here? To date, our conclusions have been that the right thing is to try to reinforce the moral

position that it is wrong to use this drug. So we have been talking mostly about stiffer jail sentences, more law enforcement to make it costlier and dangerous to participate in the system - either as a user or as a venture capitalist. But it's mostly talk because no one at any level of government finds it possible to suggest more taxes for any reason. And so the simple truth is that you can purchase crack easily, not very far from here. And we are talking to the countries where the substance is grown, processed and shipped in hopes that they will do in these countries what we have been unable or unwilling to do in our own.

There is something we could do, however, but it would mean rethinking the whole matter of morality. We could remove the legal prohibitions and with decriminalization the danger, scarcity and therefore the profitability of the entire enterprise. Without the profitability, there would be no money to pay young children $200 a week to serve as look-outs, nor would there be a reason any longer. Without the profitability the gangs which now market and sell crack within carefully defended geographical perimeters would be without their prime source of revenue and so young people would stop killing and dying, at least for this. Simple enough... Then why don't we do it? The reason is that we cannot, or at least we have not yet been able to change our minds about the matter of morality. We cannot bring ourselves to say that it is allowable, if not socially acceptable, to use crack. Because that would seem to say that it is not immoral, unethical, bad. It is not easy to do the right thing. It is not easy to know what the right thing is and people of deep moral conscience line up on both sides of this particular issue.

Is there a faith resource? Does the Christian tradition have anything to add to the conversation? In fairness we must acknowledge that there is no single Christian position, universally accepted, on most of the moral dilemmas of our world. Christians of integrity and intelligence and sincere faith will disagree on decriminalization of drugs, on the right to end pregnancy by abortion, or to prevent pregnancy by contraceptive means. Christians will disagree on capital punishment, the use of military force, etc. etc.... and in disagreeing Christians will claim the authority of God for their position and will be able to discover Biblical proof texts to support their position... all of them and each of them.

And so we must ask, is there a faith resource? If the Christian religion does not incorporate a complete set of ethical rules for life...does faith have anything to do with this type other than to complicate it?

That very issue came up early in the teaching ministry of Jesus... One time he said...

> I have not come to abolish the law, the traditional definition of goodness. It is still valid. All of it. But - as for you, my followers, your goodness must exceed that moral goodness defined by the law. For instance, the law says that killing is wrong. And it is, but I say that anger is wrong. The law says adultery is wrong, and it is. But I say that lust is wrong.

Those words are placed by Matthew at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, in a section of the Gospel narrative called the Sermon on the Mount. It is the most familiar and most frequently cited section of the New Testament. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he began... the Beatitudes... a whole new way of thinking about blessedness or happiness. And then "You are the salt of the earth." You are to live out this new life thoroughly enjoyed in the world. And now... specifically - "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." - a new definition of the very basis of moral living.

He used as his beginning point the going definition of goodness as it is described and defined in the law - the Old Testament commandments and rules and regulations, and all the accumulated commentary and interpretations - called Torah. The Pharisees were a group or party of religious laymen who dedicated their lives to keeping the Torah. The law, Pharisees believed, was a light in the darkness, Israel's gift from God. God was revealed in the law. God was worshipped and served by keeping the law. So that is what they did and although "Pharasaic" has become a perjorative term in our vocabulary, Pharisees were good people. They were generous and kind and responsible.

Jesus agreed that the religious law, the traditional definition of what it means to be a good moral person, was valid. But, at the same time he told his followers that he expected far more of them than the goodness exhibited by the Pharisees.

That, of course, is not possible if the law defines goodness. You cannot keep the commandment to refrain from killing anymore thoroughly than not killing anybody. It is not ambiguous and under most circumstances not difficult to accomplish.

What Jesus did was deepen and intensify the traditional law by moving its focus away from behavior and toward the inner spirit, motivation, attitude, inclination of his hearers, and that does get ambiguous - quickly!

What he said about anger and murder and lust and adultery, makes all of us murderers and adulterers, Emil Brunner once quipped. And for twenty centuries the Christian Church has been struggling to find a way to interpret and live his new approach to morality.

The oldest formulation emerged early in our history. Jesus' words are a new law... but obviously not everyone can abide by it so there will be two moral standards: one for clergy and another less rigorous one for the rest of the people. Thus clergy will be chaste, poor and obedient and the laity can cheer them on. That was part of the point of the Reformation... after which several other possibilities were added.

One suggested that we are all supposed to live literally by the standards Jesus taught, but in order to do that one has to withdraw from the world, and live a distinct and very different life style. A modern example of that alternative is the Amish... who take seriously and literally the precise ethical formulations of Jesus. The motion picture, Witness, was a powerful story of what happens when that style of life encounters the harshness of the modern world.

A little Amish boy, on his first adventure into the outside world, witnesses a drug-related murder in a railroad station. And when a detective is assigned to protect him, the two worlds meet head on with very tragic results. The Amish experience is strong and noble and admirable, but it teaches clearly that a literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is not relevant for most of life lived in the world most of the time.

A third alternative tries to take seriously the fact that Jesus was not as concerned with behavior as he was with the human heart, the internal soul, where human being is established, and now things get complicated. Jesus wants something more than law keeping. He wants responsibility apparently... And he gives latitude - freedom in which individuals must make difficult decisions. St. Augustine understood it this way in the 5th century. A new convert asked Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, what the ethical requirements of Christianity were. "Love, and do as you please," Augustine answered.

What Jesus was teaching was something beyond goodness. He was probing behind behavior to the human heart and in so doing redefining the focus of religion, recasting it in terms of an individual relationship with God.

"What he wants," one New Testament scholar said, "is not new behavior but new being."

"You have heard that it was said... You shalt not kill, but I say to you that everyone who is angry shall be liable to judgment." What do you make of that? Is anger always wrong or just sometimes? One inventive scholar suggested that there must have been another phrase in the original version which was omitted by the scribes who made copies of the text. Surely it must have said, "the one who is angry <u>without</u> <u>cause</u> will be liable to judgment."

One thing we know for sure and that is if anger is prohibited, we're in a lot of trouble. We have learned something about anger... namely that you cannot control whether or not you are going to have it or feel it. In fact, psychologists tell us that it is neither healthy nor possible ultimately to deny your anger or any of your feelings. People who were taught as children, and many of us were, that it is bad to be angry, don't stop getting angry, they simply repress it, express it in other ways and continue to feel guilty for feeling it in the first place. We know now that repressed anger becomes seething anger, can make life a hell, can and does affect us in physiological ways.

Sometimes, the psychologists say, we need to stop denying and repressing our anger and learn to express it, own it, acknowledge it and speak it. The idea is that mature, secure adults can both handle other people's anger and express their own appropriately. I've always been a little cautious about that. I'm not sure a raging anger ought to be expressed, to the person with whom we are angry. Sometimes we say not only our anger - but more. Sometimes we are carried away on a tide of anger that seems to pick up velocity and intensity until it is out of control. I have a sense that most incidents of child abuse or battering

women does not begin with a premeditated, planned assault... but as a result of anger out of control. The defense attorney told the court in Milwaukee that the twelve-year-old crack house guard "had been brutalized by virtually everyone he had come in contact with - even those he loved most including his mother and grandmother. I don't think he was ever exposed to an adult who did not expose him to violence," she said.

I have a respect for anger, which suggests yet another alternative. You can't not feel anger, but you do not have to live out of it. Jesus said anger is at least related to murder, a very important insight, it turn out. I conclude that anger is something we need to express appropriately, for the purposes of healing. I'm not sure the person with whom we are angry can be asked to bear the responsibility. I'm never sure a seventy-year-old parent can be expected to bear the burden of a forty-five-year-old's life-long-anger. I suggest expressing it to a third party - a pastor, a counselor, a confidante, or God. Because that is where Jesus is taking us, I believe. I'd suggest owning our anger, acknowledging its potential for hurting others and then telling it to God: "God, I'm angry at her or him. I'm hurt and I'm angry. And I don't want to be. I want to be healed. Help me. Recreate me."

Jesus wants new being, not simply new behavior.

In the meantime, the new world in which we are living presents us with moral dilemmas which are unprecedented in complexity and seriousness. They require new approaches. New thinking.

On the troublesome topic of teen age pregnancy, the National Research Council released a report on Contraceptive Development last week. It confirmed again how our unwillingness as a culture to think in new ways about ethical decisions is actually causing unnecessary pain and suffering.

No one, for example, seems to think that abortion is a good idea. No one advocates it as a convenient or appropriate method of birth control. But, in fact, the number of abortions that occur is related to the number of unwanted pregnancies, and so you would assume that preventing unwanted pregnancy would be a matter of very great importance to us. It isn't.

Research indicates that sexual activity is about the same for young people throughout the Western world. American teen-agers, however, become pregnant in numbers far greater than in other countries. The reason is simple, clear and known to everyone. Birth control information and devices are not as available to them. The National Research Council reports that this simple fact results in one and a half million accidental pregnancies and 750,000 abortions annually, and no one knows how many abused and abandoned and tragically unloved and uncared for children.

It is time to think anew about this new American tragedy. It is time for people of courage and compassion and love to step forward and tell the truth and find new ways to define goodness and morality.

John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, in Megatrends 2000, say that in a time of upheaval and change people are inclined to look to the religious extremes for moral guidance: either to a rigid legalism which relieves

them of the necessity of thinking things through and deciding what to do, or to the other extreme, the arena of personal feelings when moral decisions are made on the basis of private feeling alone.

There is a third way, the way to which God calls us, I believe. And that is the difficult way of listening to the tradition and understanding the world and then moving out into new directions.

"Sin boldly," Martin Luther once advised, "and have great faith." To live fully in the world involves some risks. He calls us to be salt of the earth and that involves mixing it up with a world that doesn't often yield to moral euphemism, or even the simple moral formulation of the past. It involves the very real possibility that we will make some mistakes. "Sin boldly and have great faith," he said because he knew about God's great forgiveness and that the issue for faith is not merely new behavior but new being.

For many people, I discover, and all pastors know it, perhaps for many of us, our relationship to God - shaped and nurtured by our relationship with the church - is marked by guilt. We can't measure up. We have a sense that whatever God expects of us, we aren't getting it done, and unfortunately moralistic, legalistic religion has confirmed that for us over and over again. Most of us don't kill. But who hasn't been angry? Andrew Greeley said that only 10% of us commit adultery; a spokesperson for the Kinsey organization said the percentage is much higher. But if Jesus was proposing a new legalism we are, all of us, murderers and adulterers. And so, guilt is a reality of our religious experience.

What Jesus really wants is new being, a new attitude, a conversion. What the Gospel is about, finally, is not more rules to guide our moral decisions, but a more intimate relationship with God. That relationship, Jesus taught, is characterized by grace and forgiveness and life made new by the power of love. That relationship will eventuate in moral decision-making that will exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, he said. That relationship, Jesus taught, is based on the fact that our judge is also our savior, that the one who sets the behavioral standard, is also the one who lived as one of us and knows our humanity, who got angry, who felt the full range of human feelings, and who loves us.

The word for all of us and each of us: for those who live with moral rigor and those who have not measured up - is a word of love. Beyond goodness. Beyond the rules Jesus wanted and wants, a brave, courageous commitment to follow, to try every day to live responsibly and faithfully in the brave new world he loves - the world he died to save.

God gives us the grace and courage we need.

Thanks be to God.